

Can critical theory be computerised and collectivised?
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The thing I've found most interesting about being involved in the SERRC is the emphasis on thinking about alternative, more collective forms of knowledge production.¹ For this blog, I'd like to return to the theme, in relation to the goals of 'critical theory'. Critical theory, I'll argue, isn't really compatible with the 'individualised' orientation of modern knowledge production, and I'll finish by suggesting it would be better developed as a collaborative project, as enabled by (fairly standard) computer and internet technologies. I also include some remarks about 'action research', and a few musings on Marxism.

Perhaps the elusive centre of gravity of the notion of 'critical theory' is the idea that, rather than simply picking out the surface regularities or deep causal mechanisms of social reality, knowledge should (also) serve as a direct link in the formation of a *collective will* capable of changing it. Knowledge should neither be identified with the published results generated by a community of experts indifferent to their own social functioning (a.k.a. 'science'), nor with a tool for private, consumeristic 'edification' (a.k.a. 'the humanities'). On the contrary, knowledge production should aim to develop systems of representation helping their readers to come to rational decisions concerning the direction of production and social life — as such serving as a focus point for the formation of an *intellectually cultivated* democratic will. In such a 'mode of production', knowledge would directly express and articulate the interests ordinary people have in their work and lives, rather than being imposed on them as a formal system: it would enable their active control over their 'lifeworld' by 'working up' their tacit technical and social knowledge, thereby facilitating self-management in the workplace and community. But social science would also be required to help inform such local processes of enlightenment, by means of an understanding of (and identification with) the broader society. It would thereby help to clarify their interconnection in a possible 'social plan', subject to less direct forms of democratic control.² Such plans would always be revisable, and social science would help to render them evaluable. This conjures the utopian image of a democratic form of socialism, radically distinct from Stalinist practice, but which is also capable of preserving a complex social division of labour and skills.

What makes this image utopian is that 'critical theory' has, self-evidently, been academically confined — and that, again self-evidently, it is completely incompatible with existing academic practice.³ It is certainly clear that the modern system of academic

¹ See my earlier thought experiment on this theme: <http://social-epistemology.com/2011/11/15/three-social-contracts-for-an-academic-collective-by-stephen-norrie/>

² For some idea as to how this might work, see Horvat, 1982.

³ Indeed, the very notion of 'critical theory'—of which I am not particularly a fan, and which I am adopting here only for rhetorical reasons—seems a product of this confinement. Lukács, whose (1971) idealisation of Bolshevik knowledge production is usually seen as the inspiration for the idea of critical theory, did not need Horkheimer's (1999: 188-252) formalistic distinction between 'traditional' and 'critical' theory because he was still able to refer to the socially concrete distinction between the sociological practices characteristic of bourgeois academia and Marxist political parties. With the definitive degeneration of the latter (partly due to their own internal contradictions), Horkheimer was left with nothing more than the aspiration for a Lukács-type learning process (a.k.a. 'critical theory'), divorced from its original but now

publication, linked to trajectories of career advancement, serves to prevent academic publications from playing a major role in collective will-formation. The basic model of tenure associated with the research university — national variations notwithstanding — made individually authored articles or monographs the chief evidential basis for discrimination between individuals for the purposes of appointment and promotion. This has encouraged academics to approach knowledge production as a personal project and, moreover, as a duel with competitors in which ideas serve as a proxy for the author's self-advancement, and in which the prize is personal occupation of the focal point of one or more discussions (a.k.a. research stardom). This has encouraged diversification of projects and exaggeration of differences, at the expense of comprehension of the whole. Recent, state-imposed accounting systems intended to increase academic productivity have only increased this tendency, rendering it even more ridiculous and dysfunctional. To be sure, by foregrounding the publications of its research stars as its most characteristic, if not its 'best' products, this has enabled some works to attain a wider influence and dissemination. Nevertheless, particularly in a period in which public influence is an object of interested manipulation by various forms of intellectual collectives (political parties, think tanks, interest groups, etc), the individual academic's (or intellectual's) chances of significantly impacting on public consciousness are rather weak.⁴

Returning to the idea of critical theory, this might suggest two forms of knowledge production: on the one hand, what may loosely be called 'participatory action research', and on the other hand, totalising theories of human history. Neither fits well with existing academic practice.

Participatory action research is a loose term — one of many! — for intersubjective forms of knowledge production which work by getting people talking and thinking together about social interactions they normally conduct unreflectively.⁵ The occasion for such collectivisation is organised through the intervention of an external practitioner (a professional 'action researcher', sometimes an academic), or may be set in place by a professional within their workplace. Because the process clarifies mutual miscomprehensions and (when successful) builds up a collective normative understanding (or social contract), this often directly leads to increases in efficiency and voluntary efforts to improve social life. However, it fits poorly with academic norms in that any 'reports' issuing from the process are, really, its least interesting product, serving merely as narrative accounts for other practitioners which are not readily accorded 'scientific' status, nor easily submitted to peer review (they are probably better checked by journalistic methods). This also makes it difficult to train action researchers.

However, the general term 'participatory action research', and the attempt to define it in terms of a series of formal procedures or stages of reflection suitable for most situations

unacceptable social basis. This hypostatization of the concept of 'critical theory' seems, however, already a step back in the direction of 'traditional theory'.

⁴ Habermas, 1989.

⁵ Carr and Kemmis, 1986, associated such forms of knowledge with Habermas' concept of critical theory, though somehow without mentioning *capitalism* once. Arguably, Dewey's pragmatism is a more natural (and more common) philosophical fit for such desocialised theories of learning.

(with suitable adaptations to local circumstances) disguises the fact that the social meaning of such practices always depends on assumptions about the ends of the particular practice, which may be quite tacit and embodied in the ‘agenda setting’ of the practitioner. The contrast is clearest in industrial action research, where the practitioner is called in by management, the procedure is always oriented to improved efficiency in meeting the productive goals defined by management. The worker is then flattered, by being allowed an element of participation, into collaboration in his own exploitation — a clear case of what Marcuse called ‘repressive desublimation’.⁶ Where, on the other hand, the research is conducted under the aegis of radical socialist unionists, as with the once-famous case of the Lucas aerospace workers,⁷ this can involve the development of an alternative production plan developed with reference to the idea of ‘socially useful’ rather than the needs of capital (in Marxist terms, use-value rather than exchange-value). Naturally, any such practice conflicts with the academic requirement for ‘value-freedom’ (i.e. acceptance of the status quo). Moreover, the Lucas case seems to indicate the limited utility of academic knowledge for such a process.⁸ At the very least, however, it does indicate the importance of the shop stewards’ broader interpretation of social reality, to which academics — perhaps via the discussions of academically educated socialists — would have certainly contributed. This leads us to the second type of knowledge.

It is obvious that in order to add up to a broader social movement, a diverse series of local social initiatives must not only be retroactively unified (‘in their concept’, as a Hegelian might say) but already developed in reference to a roughly shared interpretation of their shared social environment. Indeed, as Marxists and ‘critical theorists’ have generally insisted, no concrete situation is understandable except in relation to its global and historical context, particularly given the development of a globalising and perpetually reinvented capitalist division of labour. However, *totalisation* must be understood here not only ‘objectively’, as a unifying conception of human history, but also ‘subjectively’, in that such a conception must also attain — and deserve to attain — ‘biblical’ status as a representation of collective understanding, in relation to which actions can be coordinated.⁹ This requires a ‘systematic’ orientation designed to make it intellectually and practically ‘handleable’: thus, whatever its actual success, *Capital* is organised on a systemic model which is supposed to pass from what is immediately obvious about capitalism (production is commodified) to less obvious conclusions. But more than this, if such a ‘ritual’ status is to be compatible with the rationalistic claims of critical theory, it seems necessary that the theory be open to public examination and ongoing revision.¹⁰

⁶ Marcuse, 1991.

⁷ Wainwright and Elliott, 1982.

⁸ They were ‘smitten into silence by the specificity of our request’: ‘What could a work force with these facilities be making that would be in the interests of the community at large?’ (Cooley, 1987: 118).

⁹ The history of the Marxist concern for totalisation is surveyed, but not very well represented, by Jay, 1984.

¹⁰ The ‘biblical’ metaphor, however, proves all too apt in relation to traditional Marxist parties, which have proved incapable of separating the rational content of their systemic understanding of history from its embedding in Marx’s own texts (‘Marxism’, Lenin writes, ‘is the system of Marx’s views and teachings’) which, accordingly, attain a quasi-sacred status. Indeed, with the (partly unfair) repudiation of ‘vulgate’ writers like Engels and Kautsky, Marxism seems to have passed from a more accommodating ‘Catholicism’ to a more ‘Protestant’ and sectarian fundamentalism of the text.

It is arguable that any such totalisation would be not only scientifically superior to the actual products of the social sciences, but that it actually represents the *telos* of social science as such. However, it seems completely unattainable for normal social scientific practice, that is, as an individual project. To be sure, if society is considered a distinct level of reality from the social interactions that constitute its microstructure,¹¹ then a totalisation at the level of social reality needn't imply knowledge of every social situation. Nevertheless, it is enough to reflect that any such totalisation must synthesise theorisation of e.g. the latest forms of finance capital and the constitution of the working class, with estimates of agricultural and engineering potential, to realise that it is quite beyond individual effort. Individuals can, at best, produce fragmentary efforts intended to be contributory to such a knowledge — which is quite quixotic if the project to which it is intended to contribute is, in fact, unrealisable, or if no serious efforts are being made to realise it. Moreover, even if such a theory could be constructed — perhaps through a collaborative effort with the aid of research assistants — it would be only represent the judgement of a small number of academics and, should it prove unsuitable for its intended biblical function, either through adopting a false standpoint, through contingent errors of judgement, through excessive complexity, etc, it would be almost impossible to correct or realign it. Similarly, it would be humanly impossible to keep it up to date with either new historical developments or new critical attacks.

It seems to me, however, that new technologies may make it possible to overcome these problems. *If* a group of qualified and socially spirited academics (this would have to mean those sufficiently insulated from the demands of the publishing and perishing rat race to which early career academics are subjected) could agree on a series of basic commitments, it would seem possible to develop an e-text or system of e-texts which could be developed and published gradually, and revised in response to criticism from a broader community of 'users', much as open-source software programs are frequently developed in a series of updates.¹² By throwing their collective authority behind such a project, and by resolving to update, defend it, and perfect it, they would bestow on it a greater cultural significance than any of their individual essays or books.¹³ The work would also gain cultural strength from the fact that it could be opened up to continuous criticism — through e.g. a typical internet discussion forum — by a broader community of interested participants. This would actively involve broader social circles in the active

¹¹ Bhaskar, 1998.

¹² The series of basic commitments would have to include agreement on a method of systematisation, as well as on a number of important substantive issues (e.g. positions on alternative technology, on the disaster of Stalinist 'socialism', etc). To be sure, some might consider coming to such an agreement the main problem! However, all that is required is that a small group of collaborators come to a broad agreement— those who disagree can form their own competing collective!

¹³ The computer already allows a distinct way of writing from that which produced most of the canonical texts of contemporary discussion, which were either typed or hand-written and then typed up by someone else. In the earlier mode, writing must follow the flow of thought, and thus is less distinguishable from speech, and the articulation of a subjective viewpoint. Computer-writing, on the other hand, has divorced text-production from speech, allowing a greater degree of objectification (and perhaps potentially alienation) *vis-à-vis* its author. By analogy to the 'slow cooking' movement, we might say the computer allows 'slow writing', and with it, a greater potential for attention to systemic form. Indeed, if academia is judged by the production of knowledge rather than texts, it seems to me a straightforward case of relations of production retarding forces of production that such 'perfectionism' is today seen as a vice which (ironically) 'retards' the academic production of junk knowledge.

theoretical understanding of social reality, whilst allowing the theorists access to the insights of the broad panoply of social knowledges and intelligences and, as such, help to maintain the elusive ‘unity of theory and practice’. As such, it could help to refocalise the Left as a political project ‘beyond the fragments’ of various local and single issue struggles.

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